

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Mar 12-16, 2012
Bill Newell, Principal Washington School for the Deaf

Who is considered to be the Father of Deaf Education?

- a) Charles-Michel de l'Épée
- b) Samuel Heinicke
- c) Roy Holcomb
- d) Laurent Clerc

Answer “a” – Charles-Michel de l'Épée is considered the “Father of Deaf Education” because he founded the first publically funded school for the deaf in the world in Paris France in 1760 called, the "Institution Nationale des sourds-muets de Paris," which in English means the National Deaf-Dumb Institute of Paris. Students in this school were taught using manual signs. De l'Épée wrote a book discussing his methods of instruction called *Instruction of Deaf and Dumb using Methodical Signs*.

Charles-Michel de l'Épée was born in November 24, 1712 in Versailles, France. The story of how he became interested in the education of deaf students is famous and retold in this YouTube video by deaf historian Bernard Truffaut in French Sign Language with English subtitles:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zIN_Fwkh3w&feature=player_embedded

This year we are celebrating the 300th Anniversary of de l'Épée's birth. There is an excellent website developed at NTID/RIT containing a wealth of resources on this significant historical figure in the education of the deaf. Check it out here:

<http://infoguides.rit.edu/content.php?pid=300927&sid=2525883>

By the way, all of the answer choices listed above are considered “Fathers of.” Samuel Heinicke was a contemporary of de l'Épée and is considered “The Father of Oral Education of the Deaf.” He and de l'Épée engaged in rigorous debate about which methodology, education by the use of signed language or by speech and lipreading only, should be considered superior. This debate continues to rage 300 years later. You would think educators would have figured this out by now. Of course, the debate will likely never be resolved because it isn't about what is most effective. It is about values, beliefs and defining what it means to be deaf.

Roy Holcomb is considered “The Father of Total Communication.” Roy Holcomb was a leader in Deaf education in the 1960s and 70s. He was a strong proponent of Total Communication which was the means by which signing was brought back into

education of deaf students after oralism held sway for many years. Total Communication was a philosophy of education that advocated that whichever communication system best fit the child should be used. Theoretically, use of ASL should have been acceptable within a Total Communication philosophy. In practical application however Total Communication became associated with artificial methods of signing like Signing Exact English and with the use of signing and speaking at the same time called simultaneous communication.

Of course, Laurent Clerc, is considered one of “The Fathers of Deaf Education in America.” He along with Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet founded the first school for the Deaf in America in Hartford, Connecticut.

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